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AUTHOR Sexton, Robert F.
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ABSTRACT

Comprehensive school-reform programs under way in many states have better chances of success if they are linked to supportive external organizations. This paper describes activities of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, an independent, privately funded organization--a collection of volunteer activists that uses citizen leadership to mobilize other citizens to solve educational problems. The paper describes how the group began in the 1980s in reaction to problems in Kentucky's public-education system, which was characterized by a lack of public trust in the education community. When Kentucky passed its comprehensive school-reform legislation (Kentucky Education Reform Act) in 1990, the committee changed its focus to supporting the successful implementation of the KERA in the classroom. Requirements for creating an effective public voice include: (1) get people's attention (redefine a negative situation as solvable); (2) be credible; (3) provide thoughtful solutions; (4) select issues and focus on them; (5) form a creative alliance; and (6) be persistent. The committee is challenged to engage more people, especially parents, and to keep policy on track in a highly volatile political atmosphere. (LMI)

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The Prichard Committee Experience
Building Citizen and Parent Support for School Reform

Robert F. Sexton
AERA
April 20, 1995

There seems to be a growing sense in policy circles that the difficult, long-term, comprehensive school reforms under sail in many states have a better chance if they are linked to supportive external organizations. I represent one of these external, independent organizations–the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence–and have been asked to share a few lessons from our experience with you.

Our volunteer citizens' and parents' voice began in earnest in 1983 when we became an independent, privately-funded organization after a brief period as a state-appointed body. We had about 100 volunteer members and two staff persons (from 1983 to 1990.) We now have scores of active citizens, 85 local Community Committees for Education involving about 1000 people, and a much larger network of several thousand people. It's most useful to see the Prichard Committee more as a collection of volunteer advocates than as a traditional institution.

I want to talk about why we did what we did in the 1980s, why we thought it was needed, and what we learned. Then I want to shift to a few thoughts on the period since the Kentucky Education Reform Act was passed in 1990 and what that meant to us.

Why did we think that citizens needed to be mobilized to stimulate and fashion school reform?

There were many reasons. First, the problems were severe in Kentucky. There was much evidence that Kentucky's education system was much worse than the nation's at a time

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when, according to the bellwether report *A Nation at Risk*, America had done to its schools what, if done to us by another nation, would be considered an act of war. We traveled across the state talking with Kentuckians about statistics that showed that Kentucky was last in the nation in the percentage of adults with high school diplomas, second from last in the percentage of our adults attending college, last in adult literacy, and depressingly low on other indicators of educational performance, including spending.

One result of this performance--as well as widespread rumors and reality of political corruption--was lack of public trust. There was little public hope that the education community could or would attack such severe problems.

Next there was consensus that the school community was not equipped or inclined to solve the problem alone and that it needed encouragement. It needed new ideas, a different view of the problem, and support when it did move in positive directions. The view was that schools, even if so inclined, couldn't reform themselves alone.

Third, politicians were reluctant and cautious. Talk about school reform and school funding, and talk about taxes, was not popular. There was a stalemate among interest groups. Legislatures and political officials are inclined toward quick and simple solutions, solutions that Ernest Boyer called "a mile wide and an inch deep."

Fourth, the public and parents were disengaged from public schools, feeling shut out, thinking that the problems were too complex for mere citizens to understand, that it was too difficult to get into the conversation about subjects that sounded like technical gibberish. There was a feeling of hopelessness. So, we begin with the idea that almost all parents care deeply about the education of their children but also that they needed help.

Fifth, and finally, I believe that our volunteer members had a sense that we were engaged in something that went beyond improving schools. I said that we were activist citizens and, as such, we concluded together that many of the complex and intractable problems our state faced, like others across the nation, were not to be solved by changes in the structures of government or institutions alone. What was needed was instead a reinvestment in civic capital, in the community institutions and social organizations which have become so weakened. These complex problems require the mobilization of communities and groups of individuals who come together to solve their own problems and to think deeply about solutions. These Kentucky volunteers were willing to consider new questions and alternatives, to educate themselves, to practice the skills of citizenship and then to encourage others to use those skills, to get people's attention, to take responsibility, and to send a message to those with real authority that they must also take action. My colleagues and I believed that many problems aren't "out there," caused by someone else, but that they are our own responsibility.

We did not presume to have all the answers. But we did believe that it is the job of citizen leadership to mobilize other citizens to solve problems. And we volunteer ourselves to mobilize those resources.

So that's why we did what we did. Now let's turn to what we did, how we did it and some lessons. What I've learned comes from the work of organizing people and ideas, of operating between the world of ideas and the world of politics, and not from theory or research. So what I have learned may not be what others have learned. There are other excellent models around the country that would provide different but important lessons.

Now, what did we do?

In sum, we mobilized people and other resources to bring attention to, force action on, the problem of educational mediocrity and worse in Kentucky. When we had gotten people's attention and, when in 1990 Kentucky passed its sweeping and comprehensive reform program, we changed our direction and mobilized citizens, parents and business people to ensure that reform would move successfully from the statute to the classroom. We're still doing that and it's very difficult. Making the transition from raising cain to supporting specific programs with an impact on real students and real teachers is an entirely different matter.

I believe there are several requirements, learned from experience, for creating an effective public voice such as the Prichard Committee. I'll organize my answer to the question, how did we do what we did, by thinking aloud with you about some of these.

The first requirement is to get people's attention and, in doing so, to determine what that attention is for--what's the message? We knew that if people gave you their attention, they're giving you considerable power.

We set about collecting our own thoughts as citizens--and with other citizens, parents and teachers--and made our own statement about Kentucky's educational problem and our own recommendations for solving those problems. That took the form of a published report; it was a two-year process.

But, saying there's a problem isn't enough. We tried to redefine a negative situation (an almost hopeless situation) so that people could do something about it, to define a negative condition as a problem that people could solve.

We got people's attention through hundreds of chicken dinners, through expressing the business community's concern, and by encouraging supportive media across the state. Someone said they thought we translated ideas to the public. In a way we did, but we were really asking the public to do the work themselves. The "we" were literally hundreds of volunteers.

We engaged people directly and created a statewide classroom on education reform for the public. Anyone could join that classroom and people knew that. We did that with town forums and gatherings. Our 1984 town forum gathered 20,000 people together in 145 locations on one night in November.

The second requirement is to be credible. People must believe that you are sincere; they must give you their trust; they must take you seriously. (It goes without saying that to be credible you also have to be independent.) A few more points about credibility:

Deeds, not image, are the source of deep credibility. I said we engaged thousands of people through the town forum. It's possible to gain immense good will, and also many good ideas, just by asking people what they think and taking them seriously. We've been listening for years, and we're trying very hard to keep on listening.

We followed what Ernie Cortez calls the iron law of organizing, "never do for people what they can do for themselves." We trained local organizers and became a symbol to other local volunteers, long shut out of local schools by political barons. One said, "You're our hope down here. If you can do it across Kentucky, we can do it here."

We educated ourselves. Our citizen volunteers studied the issues, read tedious research, listened to experts, and met about 65 times in the two-year period between 1983 and

1984.

To be credible your deeds must show that you are above politics of the partisan and electoral kind while operating in a political manner. You must show by deeds that you have no hidden political agenda. You must show, for instance, that you are not building a base to run for office.

A key deed is giving credit to others and not to yourself, the opposite of the behavior of a candidate for office and thus a demonstration that you are not a candidate. Given the current atmosphere of distrust, giving credit to others is essential.

For credibility you also dish up straight talk, call a problem a problem, avoid sugar coating. You have to put the hay down where the cows can get it. This is very hard now that we have a reform that we like. We can't just moan and gripe about the problem; we have to talk about a solution that generally we like. It changes the rules of our behavior.

And, finally, a major effort for us through the 1980's and to this day was to work closely with the media. This means encouraging coverage of education in all its aspects, including the investigation of problems. In doing this it becomes obvious that the press can do a great deal of work that a small organization cannot. The strategy is to praise good reporting and editorial work and to criticize shallow or inept work, mindful of admonitions about fighting with people who buy their ink by the barrel.

And, for credibility, you must be responsive. We try to respond through our "800" line, through visits in the communities, and by providing services to individuals who ask for them and seeing that those services are always of high quality.

And that leads to my third requirement, one easily skipped over, and that's the

imperative to provide thoughtful, responsible and solid work, ideas make sense and are not half-baked. It also means being responsive to what constituents need. We have done this with numerous reports, with research on the progress of reform, with comments in the media, and by aggressively reaching out to various constituencies. Too many organizations miss their opportunity to lead by only complaining and criticizing, and discredit themselves by proposing nothing to solve the problems they identify.

Quality work must also engage the emotions. Our voice, joined by others, created a sense of possibility in a land of hopelessness.

Fourth, it's critical to select issues, and even fights, strategically. The rule is focus, focus, focus, and stay focused.

For us focusing meant concentrating on how schools can change teaching so all children can achieve more knowledge and at much higher levels. That's not just rhetoric. It's a fundamentally radical idea that challenges directly the way schools have been organized and teachers prepared throughout most of our history.

Focusing meant also that we respectfully declined to fight about some topics that many other people love to fight about. We did not, for example, fight about prayer in the schools, about abortion, about condom distribution, or even about how to teach subjects like reading. We believe that there are many school matters people believe to be very important, and rightfully so. But these subjects aren't all equal, and they don't all have equal power to improve what happens between teachers and students in the classroom.

Focus, though, doesn't mean rigidity. Flexibility is key as well. We must respond and adjust as new issues emerge.

Fifth, it is necessary to form creative alliances. We've done this with other education groups, the Education Coalition, with the business community through our work with the Partnership for Kentucky School Reform, through association with groups like Kentucky Youth Advocates and the Kentucky League of Cities.

The sixth and final requirement is persistence. It is not trite to remember Woody Allen's homily that "ninety-five percent of success is just showing up."

It's critical that reform advocates publicly commit to being there until the job is done. As reform unfolds across the nation, "being there" means independent advocates can produce important coherence in policy and a bridge between one set of officials and another. The idea, says Susan Fuhrman, is to keep policy from veering off in different directions.

Those with positions of authority, by the way, certainly will be there. I love the old political science quote from George Washington Pluckett from Tammany Hall. His lesson to "reformers" (not, in his mind, a compliment) was that they shouldn't be like "morning glories, who look lovely in the morning and withered up in a short time, while the regular machines kept on flourisin' forever like fine old oaks."

Persistence is tough. Volunteers get tired. Funding is hard to find. And now that reform is in place the toughest work, we've discovered, has started. Sticking with it is harder. We see a situation something like the one in Eastern Europe, which was described as moving from the "politics of drama to the politics of endurance."

That's in fact a good metaphor for where we are now. Let's shift to what's happened since the passage of the 1990 reform, and think about our work as Kentucky tries to implement one of the nation's most sweeping and comprehensive school reform programs.

Briefly, what is that reform? It's based on the premise that all children can learn at high levels, a radical idea. The basic pieces are that funding should be equalized, as much as possible, between the wealthiest and the poorest districts (that resulted in the largest tax increase in the history of Kentucky). One measure of our success in public dialogue is that there has been no serious backlash against that tax increase or school funding increase. Public opinion polls also show strong support for equity among schools and, also, for reform. The reform sets high academic standards for all students, measures results, holds schools accountable for achieving results, pushes decisions to the local level through school based decision making, retrains the workforce, restructures bureaucracies to provide more service than regulation, tries to clean up political corruption, provides pre-school for all four-year-olds, provides coordinated social services through family resource and youth service centers, provides extra school services for children who need extra help, provides a healthy dose of technology for enhanced learning. All this is to be accomplished between 1990 and 1996. This is a huge amount of work for educators and for parents and the whole community as well.

Energizing citizens to implement reforms as difficult as Kentucky's is a striking new reality for volunteers like us. One reality is that this will never be over, it will go on forever. It's the "the politics of endurance." We're seeing some very difficult challenges emerge as we operate on the cutting edge of standards-based, high aspiration reform.

As reform moves from concept to classroom, it effects real children, real teachers, real parents. Holding constituents together as general reform concepts become quite specific and painful is extremely difficult. I repeat that it's one matter to stir up discontent, it's another

matter to implement a real program. Your own constituents can say that "I didn't know we meant that."

Second, a public view is unfolding in specific response to the goal of setting and measuring academic standards that's new and difficult. We see great public confusion with the language of reform--setting high standards, problem solving, continuous learning, authentic assessment--terms like that. Parents seem to want more of what they believe they had--the basics. What's important for many is memorization and rote learning. Many parents have trouble with talk of "high order skills" and "critical thinking." Their main concern, says a recent report, is with order, discipline, and teaching the basics. To deal with this, we must engage parents in more fruitful conversation with teachers so teachers can explain to them what they are doing in the classroom. We need more direct and clear language about good teaching.

This parental alarm is fueled by a national political movement and by terrifying rhetoric that floats across American via radio talk shows and television preaching, what is called the culture wars. This isn't my topic, but it's a factor influencing the implementation of standard driven reforms like Kentucky's.

Fourth, several big policy and practice questions start to emerge. Will incentives have a positive impact on teachers and change for the better how they teach? Can teachers really do what's expected of them? How are those teachers to be retrained? Can school councils really restructure curricula and redirect teaching so that all students are taught well? Can we effectively measure school performance?

So new challenges emerge for a group like ours. These include engaging the public

more deeply in conversation and helping the public learn for themselves what it means to be educated today not yesterday. At the same time there's a great need for basic information on reform as well as about specific reforms.

We must also provide a bridge between elections, help policy stay on track, keep things from veering off in the wrong directions. We must counsel patience through work with the media and parents, and encourage public comfort with long-term solutions rather than quick fixes. At the same time--and this is very difficult--we must learn from experience and make adjustments as we go along.

Next, we have to engage more people, especially parents. This also requires helping communities think about shared responsibility for raising children. Children won't reach the higher academic levels we expect without families and communities helping.

And, this is all to be done in a highly volatile political atmosphere. So far, however, we've been lucky, and we have not seen a killer reaction like those in Virginia, California, Pennsylvania, or Connecticut.

So, in summary, we have helped create a public and that public has forced dramatic action. We've helped to make substantial progress for improving the education of children. We're still on track.

The challenge is to keep doing this in the new world of reform implementation. We believe doing this will be the toughest challenge our generation has ever attempted.